# FIELD


IN A WORD, I SEE NO SYNTHESIS OF POETRY AND IDEOLOGY, SAVE PERHAPS IN THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN MEANING AND CHANCE!
WHERE'S MY BLOODY DINNER YOU POSER!
FREUD: FAMOUS NUT CASES
HEAVY METAL
DIY
BARRY
1 AND 1957
MYTHOLOGIES
WAITING FOR GODOT
MAX BYGRAVES

# FIELD

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This issue is dedicated to
Chloe Hamilton Young
(1927-1985)
who helped proofread FIELD
and provided advice on design
for 15 years

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## THE MICROSCOPE IN WINTER

Caught in my mittens' mohair barbs —
goosedown like thrown boas of a chorus line,
evergreen needles with pitch stitches,
some wavy unshaven seeds of virgin's bower.
My eye looks down the funnel: under the light
the crooked finger of a pervert in a car;
dew in the golf-tee goblet of a lichen —
a lone crystal of glamour in a darkened theatre.
Such quiet bodies, gathered in the dusk,
thalluses and plumose fruits, silvery everything.

I bought this for my mother in crisis
so her outlook could rise
to the height of a bur
and leap the distance through a quill.
But she says, *Not yet*, feet the size
of catkin stamens. For she will study
her sleep, she says, she'll diet her curiosity,
blind to this charming mouse-food, blind
except to nightmares. She focuses on children
and we are terror. We are all too big.

Yet precisely because of your monster, dearest,
we require technology for you.
A good spider must have more eyes
than two: she needs a camera,
telescope for undomesticated space,
binoculars to hoop the faster birds.
Through these prescription lenses, face
beings who do not care you're there.
Then, to your relief, neither will you.

Boodee — dew in its eye — reflects the light,
a flashbulb in a mirror; green tastebuds

bulge all over, nappy as a rug and knotted.
Or see this red oak leaf like our mother-flesh.
Shiny. Like jerky. Or potato-chip skins
where insects chewed us for another hour of life.

It is chilly when I wrest the sweater from the tree.
Dial it in clear: there is your monster
saying to all the larger world that scares it
*I grow kinked but not mad,*
*so rest on me, liverwort-haired maenad,*
*scientific muddy shepherdess. Look into this,*
*how, scintillating under battery light,*
*I am a greater power of moss.*
*My microscopic cushion shows its claws.*

## HALLUCINATION

When I think of my bride year,
Of becoming a housekeeper day by day,
Of the fear you were just seeing things
In me, I remember the Revere Ware pot

With the terrible brown gurgling froth,
Entree from the night that man
You introduced into our half-furnished rooms
Told us all about the *Amanita pantherina.*

You were interested
In every mystical possibility. You lined up
Many poisonous mushrooms on a pine board
To shrivel across the radiator.

He said it was "a nothing experience,"
Profound. For five years
He learned from it, five years without
Preconceptions, nothing between himself

And the decor, the hollow
Telephone ringing. Annihilation —
But like the curious
Added zeroes that increase a number.

I had the sense
Of air being spirited away,
Of atmosphere exiled for slowing a brisk
Thought, or bachelor freedom, or

For drugging a homelife terribly dull.
O his bare travelogues! —
Grim for me, intoxicating for you,
In our attic apartment with waiting crib.

Spore prints, rashes as baby-talc white
As the paint crinkling off the drying-plank,
Spawned unseen; all veils pulled back
For a kiss.

How I hoped nothing
would ever happen.
But you simmered them, skimmed off
A ciphering foam, and then
You carved and swallowed one.

Then I put candles on the radiator.
You were alive; we got back days of visions.
We celebrated *something* and the year was gone.
All the perspiring, watchful tapers fainted

Into zeroes wide enough to be born through.

## THE LITTLE PINS OF MEMORY

There was a child's Sunday suit
Pinned to a tailor's dummy
In a dusty store-window.
The store looked closed for years.

I lost my way there once
In a Sunday kind of quiet,
Sunday kind of afternoon light
On a street of boarded up buildings.

How do you like that,
I said to no one.
How do you like that,
I said it again today.

That street went on forever,
And all along one could feel the pins
Behind one's back, snug and still sharp
In the dark and heavy cloth.

## CHILD

During the great and humorless invisible winter,
None of the loaves would mold, the air stayed
Shiftless, and great dark smears appeared
On the linoleum below the sink, under the witless
Broom, under the Frigidaire door where sometimes
A little juice spilled or some new ice was made.
The winter was a boot track. Or a fly that never knew
Life would not go on like that.
Buds were invisible
Inside the trees. Every blossom on the cherry tree
Was invisible. Invisible rocks sat unseeable
On tables. Shells at the beach were too far away
To believe.
Invisible lawnmowers in garages smelled
Dull, like oil, and had no significance. Invisible
Sunlight scented the clouds and had no meaning.

During the great uninteresting gray and invisible
Winter, you forgot about flowers and enough to eat,
About everything but the flat dull house and the
Flat dull hours and the invisible landlord's heel.
You forgot the sun, and the renewal of grass.
You forgot friends. Now forget the terrible
Unpleasant, unforgiveable, humorless invisible winter.
Let it drift out on the air when you open the kitchen
Door, just as they say, and hope it goes away.

## EATING WORDS

My lips have gone on
their sensual business
becoming flesh: a stick of wood —
to suck the bark, the green edge,
to tongue the pale center, then

a popsicle stick, to push it back
to the choke of the tongue
until there is a picture: slabs of boat dock,
a passion of color pervading all, and salt,
and far away a strum, a motor.
Water drips from an oar.

Mouth. A rose goes into it. Lips
hold the thick layers of membrane,
calmly cover the rose
while the eyes see some of it — see sky,
see light rose-yellow.
The flower springs back to its hover
above the grass and the rosebed,
and it shakes, it shakes,
but it is no less.

Thought, too — thread
on the tongue before
it enters the needle, a small
forked tongue that goes in,
then on and on.

And if, in the carpeted motion
under the wing of the cross
mouth holds the body of Christ,

*given for you, happier*
*he who dies by the sword*
*than he who dies by hunger*

then mouth also knows
other planets, round as marbles.

But all the words have to be eaten,
all sticks, threads, waters, and flowers —

and death must be the heaviest swallow.
If the world is painful going down,
it ought to be so. It is a mouthful.

# PINKS

*Planting*

Tonight is the night of the Last Supper.

As I cover the seeds with soil
the wind blows the packet off the rail.

All of it, all of it has fallen. Seeds,
leaves, earrings made of silver, shards of
glass, a gray cat that walked away fast
with his ears back. Fallen,
between these two close houses.

Is it an easier task to not be half-crazy,
to not poke around while I pick up the packet
for earrings blown off years ago in wind,

simpler not to let this wind catch in my hair,
as I stand lost in gravel in my bedroom slippers?

I think these pinks can never grow,
but later I sprinkle them tenderly with water.

And a striped fat tiger comes to the rail.
I spatter her gently then touch her
on the cheek. I have left her with a tear.

*Sprouting*

How little or how much we will believe
stems out of the ground and keeps. Wings come there
to keep out of flood and stars wind up
circling through the leaves. Each doubt
curves out and flowers and must turn
to a useful or a dry seed. That is all

we can believe. When it is over, it never
shuts to a close like a leaf. How little
or how much we will believe.

*Adding*

Statice into you, into the earth, like money.
Shredded paper, rivers of ribbons, confetti
from pinata, statice into you, big pot
that lost the jade. Guilty. But the crow
squawks, *planting, someone's planting*
someone's
pinks are sprouts and the jade's dead,
propped too badly during a hungry
cold musty and airless winter.
Statice into you, big pot that lost the jade,
statice into you, into the earth, like money.

*Halooing*

Hello, I haloo to the neighbor
during the empty threads
of his record. Uh, isn't it a little
high?
By the way,
did you hear, tonight a comet
is passing by?
Big mouth,
and in the background of earth
the striped cat is looking up
and eating, as striped cats look up
in the background
and keep eating.

*Vanishing*

Wings with a beak of wattling
and width between dark crosses on the air
width of light, let it nest there.
Who, who and what above the wasps
and hovering in what gutter
in the corner, what is there, then
wings gone, were hovering a moment,
are here hovering, or hovering elsewhere
and we are not the same about ourselves.

*Appearing*

The bark like a rock makes a sack
or a man, his knees, and maybe a sack-
rock by him, a sack of sand or grass.
When I walk by him, every other tree
wheels saying, each, we are each a person.
We have staked our lives on being tree.
We have now and will always have
a right to be. And the bark is as strong
and beautiful as hand-carved stone.
Each made itself, its own
individual tree. Made itself, as though
each were made to make itself by someone.

White sun on bark
dark shades in the cracks running
over like water, darkness of water.
White sun on water, dark shade
like rocks or leafy shelter. Prefer

to follow the level path away from here
out of creation and into creating.
Prefer, prefer and make ahead

an arrow and fly there. Fly to
making over and over, Fly to
making, time after time. Fly
to making once or twice and then
once or twice again. Fly to making.

*Aubade — A Dream*

The last illumination
before the sun springs up
I can learn a single phrase
from an old Swedish book
before a heavy figure
comes from another room
I have the spelling right
*the moon is not a slave*
that ought to be a wine
heady as blackberry

*Blooming*

No better world.
All the situations
I ought to have understood
differently, rooms,
and in them, who I had to be,
the texture of the darkness
at the center of the cedar,
leaves that fell, the end
of time, it all storms around me
in the still August sun.

As though all luck
were in recognition of color
I take the yellow poppy
from the rubble in the alley

and a rare fly lights at my feet.
It is green like a jewel,
and there is no time
like the present
for the statice
to branch up, wake white, pansies
to face the face of the cat
in rapt devotion. The landlord
cordons off the porch
for the new steps, and briefly
it is a balcony, where,
large and sturdy,
rises one pink.

## MORRO ROCK

*for M.J.*

a Thirties blue fedora
slouching through thick China fog off the Pacific;
or, in bright sun, the grey colt
romping in curls of surf, the wash
at its heels, foam breaking against the slate chest;
Duchamp-Villon's horse stolen from its museum
and spray-painted camouflage green,
sliding from the junker pickup
speeding along Highway One, bouncing from its crate
as it slams across asphalt and the gravel shoulder,
at rest, finally, in the cold sand,
nose awash in running tide,
some huge and abandoned engine
stripped from its hot car,
salvage in the sea's green oil,
churning still in the vicious pistons of surf.

I remember best stories in which it figures
as centerpiece or sublime backdrop:
the great albacore run of the Sixties,
men in fraying mackinaws stained with blood
crammed thick as D-Day on the decks
of an excursion or half-day boat
chugging slowly through light fog,
slicks belowdecks, poles high-masted,
a small denuded forest on the sea's false winter,
maybe a thousand fish iced in the hold,
the coast in sight, harbor invisible
except for the black bead of the Rock,
a notched landfall, eloquent on the horizon.

Or the time I played Weston with it,
forcing my father to drive north one day,
up the coast through patchy fog to the Bay.

We stopped at an overlook
snarling with brush and bunches of iceplant,
and he chose the shot, setting the tripod,
while I fiddled with filmpacks
and tested the cloth shutter in the car.
We waited an hour for the fog to be right —
the Rock emerging from it, finally,
a black clipper from the sea.

And I knew a girl once
who lived near there,
and whom I'd visit,
hitching north, needing her still.
She was the first I'd known
who could sit, oblivious,
still in her long shift,
pull both knees to her arms,
and rock gently in the sand
while a thin film of sea washed around her.
I'd stand barefoot in the foam
while the ocean percolated around us,
and toss wet handfuls of sand
towards the combers, empty of feeling.
The Rock filled the space behind us.

Sometimes though,
it's successful lovers I recall,
the battered myth of my teens,
a cheap tale told over bonfires
snapping with kelp and whistling driftwood.
They were young too,
or old beyond counting,
a bachelor Abraham and maidenly Sarah
working their poor farms
on opposite ends of the cove.

They saw each other Sundays at church,
sold raffle tickets and donated specialties
to the annual charity auction —
he volunteered lessons in pier fishing,
she, a picnic lunch in the park by the dunes.
Shyly at first, then with humor and verve,
they bid for each other, waving off competitors.
There was a season of courtship —
football games, holiday dinners together,
a New Year's Eve with foreign champagne
and Glenn Miller records on the hi-fi.
By the next spring, they were making love,
discreetly at first, then, finding the gods
in each other, fierce as teenagers
parked by the Rock, they'd kiss openly,
sprawl over each other on blankets at the Esplanade,
ignoring first the whispers, then the minister's call
and letters of petition from the neighbors.
Before the police could come,
after indecent afternoons under the pier,
riders in pickups came,
hooded like hanged men or cowled in ski masks.
There were women too, undisguised
in their housedresses but keening in the night
as they assembled, crowlike, by the farmshack.
No gunfire, the lovers were killed with stones,
with the snapped limbs of beach oak
and a quick, purging fire of hate.

Before death, smeared with bruises
and the beach tar and twigs of ritual,
the couple spoke through their wounds
and fear of death, mumbling an exchange
of pledges and a curse for the Bay.

The following day, the charcoaled pillars
and collapsed floor still hissing,
a pair of cranes landed, loonlike,
from the overcast, snow-flurried skies.
A runaway chill spreading south from the Sierras
had brought them, and the steaming ruins
made their haven from the cold.
They danced a curious rite of celebration,
blue and grey-tipped wings furling,
red dandelion crests erect,
lifting from ground to air like curling smoke,
until, finally, by early evening,
they drifted downwind past the town
and landed cloudlike, small white floats,
plumed gardenias on the Rock's dark brow.

Love is always violent *and* sacred, and though death
might be peace, dying often seems love's own act,
a strong taking and the murder of reason.

All is true, a story sanded by several tellings
until it shines, jewel in the soft fingers of tide,
the constellated image high in its heaven of likenesses.

It doesn't matter how I think of it,
it continues to define itself,
this chunk of continent equal to nothing.

*Miroslov Holub*

# THE DIMENSION OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

The fact that I cannot imagine the present moment has always worried me. By the present moment I mean a conscious individual state or process, an experience; the larger-scale present is rather easier to grasp. What is a moment, what is this moment in which I evidently exist, unlike Nature, which according to Whitehead's famous quotation does not exist in a moment?

As a matter of fact, I can imagine eternity much better, particularly when looking up at the sky or the ceiling of a waiting room.

For me, the present moment has always been a dimension without a dimension; it bothered me so much that I once wrote an essay and entered it in a college literary competition. I came in fifth, but only theoretically, because immediately after the announcement of the awards the competition was sort of annulled, and my inner concept of the present moment was thus further impaired.

I have finally found satisfaction in recent data of experimental psychology. The present moment lasts three seconds. In our consciousness, the present moment lasts about three seconds, with small individual differences.

The basic experiment is very simple: the tested subject is presented with a brief light or sound signal; the person is asked to reproduce the signal. If the signal lasts less than two seconds, the reproduction is always slightly longer. If the signal lasts almost three seconds — or a little over two seconds in some persons, there is a sudden reversal and the tested person interprets the signal almost accurately. If the signal takes more than three seconds, the tested subject shows a tendency to shorten the repeated version. Five-second signals are often reproduced as three-second ones and mistakes increase with the duration of the signal.

This shows that stimuli lasting more than three seconds cannot be maintained by our consciousness as a whole; we are somehow compelled to correct them. Therefore, the subjective present can be defined and it is as characteristic and real as the size of shoes you wear.

The so-called metronome test produces the same results. The metronome, the ruthless commanding officer of our musical attempts, ticks away, as we know, at any set intervals, and each stroke is the same. However, listening to a metronome, we can easily make ourselves perceive one stroke as stronger, the following one as weaker. The alternation of subjectively stronger and weaker strokes produces the time-joined formation "tick-tock, tick-tock"; two subsequent strokes form a unit of perception — they become inseparable, they belong together to such an extent that if one tick or tock suddenly disappeared, we would hear it in our mind. And, again, this is only true in case the time interval between the two strokes does not surpass two or three seconds. If it does, we are no longer capable of forming subjective accents and patterns.

The discovered dimension of the psychological present moment would naturally have considerable practical consequences. For instance in the arts it would be like a universal key. Every musical composition, especially of classic or romantic tradition, has its basic tempo which the musician either keeps or breaks. This tempo should be in some relation to the dimension of the present moment. Musicologists acquainted with the above-mentioned psychological findings have so far examined Mozart's music. Several independently run tests have demonstrated that Mozart's musical motifs average two to three seconds.

Research in the lofty province of classic poetry has also shown what is called the "present-time frame." In seventy-three percent of all German poems, from Gryphius to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, verses read aloud last from two to three seconds. Verses

lasting over four seconds are, or can be, divided into shorter segments, and the reader makes a slight but noticeable pause in the middle of the line. Analysis of interpretations of Goethe's poems shows that a verse having fewer syllables is read markedly more slowly, or with a longer pause. Greek and Latin epic hexameters are divided by a strong caesura into two three-second segments and the same time unit has been found in different English, French, Japanese and Chinese metered poetry (F. Turner and E. Pöppel, *Poetry*, August 1983).

The three-second poetic LINE of Turner and Pöppel appears to be a "carrier-wave" of classical poetries in any language system; poetry as an art of language is presumably processed by the left brain lobe. But the meter based on the LINE carries meaning in the fashion of a picture or melody and integrates the right-brain processing into the left-brain activity. Thus, "the metered language comes to us in a 'stereo' mode, simultaneously calling on the verbal resources of the left and the rhythmic potential of the right" brain hemisphere. In addition, meter "clearly synchronizes the speaker with the audience and provokes a 'rhythmic community' essential to the 'social solidarity' " — the great presence and simultaneity of people — which is about the best that poetry can do. The authors make in their magnificent essay a strong case for the "cultural universal" of metered poetry as opposed to "free verse."

I have undertaken some micro-research on the Czech TV program, "The Sunday Night Poems." The poems were by Nezval and well recited; a verse lasted almost exactly three seconds, shorter verses were prolonged by slower reading or pauses, longer ones were reduced by a quicker tempo. I was almost frightened and felt I ought to apologize at the Poet's Corner, but what for, really? The famous poet had simply stuck, intuitively, to the given ancient law which he applied to his free verse. I may be wrong — as usual — but I can't escape the feeling that at least in some linguistic and cultural contexts the LINE concept applies to free verse too. In some free verse systems the LINE may be

subdivided into meaningful substructures, but basically a good free verse operates with the three second "experience parcels" which are enforced by "intellectual breathing pauses," resemblances and echoes in single units.

Besides, free verse in our cultural context operates within a strong metered poetry tradition and is perceived against the background of traditional poetry patterns not as a negation, but as a variation of the ancient "poetry habit." Contrary to Turner's and Pöppel's conclusion about the social role of free verse, in our experience free verse has emerged as a tool of broad social concern in poetry, as a carrier of political accents stripped of the mellowing and mollifying effect of traditional meters; it is an instrument of intellectual analysis centered on meanings, "experience parcels" of general meanings, rather than on private feelings: I do not know any bureaucratic establishment which would prefer (as Turner and Pöppel suggest) free verse. I know of many which just love the traditional rhymed verses, because they do not say so much and rest in the traditional private domain of agreeable songs.

And here we get to common everyday speech, in which experts (Pöppel's school in Munich) have found involuntary insertions of roughly millisecond pauses which may be prolonged in some up to tenths of seconds that break up the verbal flow every three seconds. They say that during this "intellectual breathing pause" the following speech unit is being pre-programmed, in lucky individuals even a thought might be pre-programmed. That goes for children as well, unless they are threatened by parental or school punishment and censures. And the same goes for Chinese speakers, because the subjective present moment is independent of language, grammar and syntax. Those who read their speech from paper for accuracy are an exception. The segmentation of speech by intellectual breathing pauses is so fundamental that it is almost impossible to imitate. The unpleasant character of a memorized statement simulating human speech consists in the very fact that it lacks time units, structure and natural pauses.

The dimension of the psychological present probably does not concern only speech; speech is a phenomenon suitable for demonstration and measuring. I dare to think that present-time frames are implied even in the process of thinking and feeling, and everything that is contained in the consciousness takes place in those tiny facets, in switching on and off, fading in and out, emerging and submerging. You cannot get into somebody's head, you might just as well ask a meal worm how to bake bread, but I can at least ask if, when you are thinking, your thinking is an uninterrupted, uniform flow? Is it not rather a procession of brief tests, pauses, criticisms of the preceding thoughts, new trials?

And: how long are we happy? Using my well-tested and reproducible model of taking off tight shoes, I cannot say I was happy for ten minutes after taking them off. Maybe those few seconds, followed by a reflection in the way of — oh, great, and also, damn, those shoes are tight! And another couple of seconds . . .

I strongly suspect that we simply happen in segments and intervals, we are composed of frames flickering like frames of a film strip in a projector, emerging and collapsing into snake-like loops on the floor, called the just-elapsed past.

And since we live permanently convinced that the past is past and it will be amended, and the future, even the immediate future, will certainly be even better and with fewer errors, since we live permanently removed from and critical of our own past, permanently removed from and in the hope of our oncoming future, the present-time frame of several seconds is the only unconditional manifestation of our ego.

In this sense, our ego lasts three seconds. Everything else is either hope or an embarrassing incident. Usually both.

*translated by Dana Hábová with the author*

## MEATBALLS

After dinner they talk about nuclear war,
and I can't take it in. Small cups
of coffee. Earnest and passionate.

At six in the morning, the lights
of the village are like the last cinders.
The sky and the lake are one black hole
in which the rain keeps falling.

I stand at the window and count
my fears. They come so fast
I can barely name them. I barely
have time to feel their weight.
There are nine, ten, no twelve fears
before I get to nuclear war.
I can't do a thing about any of them.

All day I watch the rain's thin
curtain as the sky and the lake
turn grey behind it, pearl,
then grey again. I count
my fears. I make them the size
of small meatballs. I put them
on toothpicks. What else
can you do with fears?

By evening there are more meatballs
than lights in the village. And after
dinner they're at it again. Over
coffee. Earnest and passionate.

At six in the morning, the lights shine,
the sky is black, the lake is black,
and the rain is still raining. I stand
at the window. I count the lights.

## AT THE STATION

My aunts who sit side by side
in their wheel chairs at the Seattle Home
for the Aged never wanted to be aged
in Seattle. Never wanted to be always
together, unmarried, last of the sisters
and nobody left to blame.

They behave like ex-lovers, bitter
but civil when they meet in a room
full of old friends who know better.
They are not certain who we are
or why they have to go
with us to America.

Marion is strapped to her chair
and plucks at the binding around her waist.
Fan begs her to stop. Little bird bones,
they are so brittle, shrunk back almost
to what they were in the beginning.
The trunks are already in the cart.

We are trying to make them smile.
We put small squares of chocolate
between their fingers and swallow hard.
They drink the sweet milk of reproach
and the sour milk of gratitude.
It runs down their chins.

Their eyes are wide open, looking
at someone behind the mirror.
He clicks his heels. He is Polish,
with a riding crop. He's at the station
where they left him in 1912,
waiting to kiss their hands.

## A JAPANESE FAN

When I hold a chicken over the gas
to singe the blunt ends of feathers
sticking from legs and wings, the random
hairs, the loose flap dangling
over the broken neck, fat
crackles and the bumps in the skin
burn black. I pluck the singed hairs
one by one. It takes me an hour
to clean two chickens.

This morning at the bus stop I saw
a woman fan herself with a paper fan.
It had a cherry tree and a tiny
snow-covered Mt. Fuji painted on it.
The sun was so hot we could barely
breathe. I watched her climb slowly
up the mountain. The air got thinner.
When she wiggled her toes in her sandals,
she could feel the snow.
She wiped some of it on her cheek.

I need a Japanese fan in my kitchen.
I need a little wind to get me
from place to place.
When I tell you about the snow
my words are small origami birds
with the meanings inside.
I want you to unfold them
and look at them under the light.

The wings of this chicken
have sharp little elbows.
I have to unfold them
and flatten them over the flame.

I think of my father with his words gone,
regarding his hands. The weight
of his waxy fingers. I could see
he was trying to lift them,
trying to remember what to do.
When I held his dead hand in my hand
he seemed to be holding me.

The blue flame hisses when the fat melts
and jumps into orange. One tip
of a red-hot finger over Mt. Fuji.

## HUNGER

What goes out into the world in boots
comes back
banging a spoon on the messy table: *More.*

Day comes back dusk, was it
brightness you wanted?

You go out full. Night
brings you home again, dragging
a sack of emptiness.
And what did you ask for?
Manna from heaven, six-pointed,
with its little beads of honey?

This is the house that was carved for you
from a single beam of cedar.
The meal is set steaming on the white cloth.

You've had your seven wishes
and never been grateful.
When all this
vanishes

you'll be back
in that hovel by the sea,
sweeping the bare stones.

## THE GHOST

What stirs it up from the muck again,
thirty years' worth,
just when I was able to see
enlarged in water
the tangled stems at the bottom?

You sat in the rowboat, head down,
hands closed around nothing.
"You never loved me," you started,
and looked up suddenly.
Or did I say it?

What we leave behind
grows in seaweed, it gathers
on rocks that stand still forever,
their backs glazed blue.

Reach down with a forked stick, one touch
and the ghost
swirls and rises, a cloud of silt endlessly
raining itself out.

Look how it settles down and pretends
to be solid.

## LOOKING AT SCHILLER'S PEN

A quill won't do. You can write boldly with it, but then what? It scratches near the truth, but in the end it's not the truth, that's waiting to be discovered. We all write according to Petrarch's formula: Say again what's been said before, only more beautifully. But it's tricky even with your ballpoint. Is Columbus any better? Traveling to India with the risk of discovering America. When you write, you can get where you don't want to be.

"You" I say — I know that's not allowed. But I'm hoping for something more general, and I don't understand people who reach their goal, as long as it's a goal. Odysseus, a living message-in-a-bottle, and the message has outlived itself. Message-in-a-bottle, ship, what kind of words are those? What about the sea currents you gave yourself over to, the true crossing from snow to tropics? The jet's my companion, telegrams my form of expression, the soul can't keep up and misunderstandings are to be expected. Even in the Gulf Stream insight and understanding don't just happen. Our love-making lasts as long as a Coke, you can still see the speech-bubbles gurgling up. "You and I, God's lovely wreckage." Physical time's established itself by now and we won't reach fifty. Our attempts to be consistent presuppose a journey to Alpha Centauri. Do the backstroke instead, or dolphin-style.

"I'll rest content if —" we read in 1805, and the sentence goes on.

# YELLOW

The word yellow doesn't appear in Schiller. I haven't ever checked it out, but I like to believe it. Though he would've known about lemons. And yellow curtains, apples, the colors at sunset. What inspired him, what didn't?

While we're thinking about this, he laughs into his little fist. Not so little, really, since his hand is fairly large. So he laughs into his fist. Why his fist, why doesn't he open his hand? Something else for us to think about, and he's still laughing to himself (see above).

Anyway, he's laughing, and I use the present tense because he's immortal — in Weimar he still stands holding hands with Goethe.

Yellow's a pretty color. All colors are pretty, when you think how few there are. We can't see infrared or ultraviolet. They don't appear in Schiller either. He most likely stuck to nuances, combinations, contrasts. Understandably, it's just a stylistic principle. Or an accident. But we don't like to admit it. We think everything should have deeper significance. Here, it's that he died before he ever used the word yellow. Death too is an accident. It's only later we find out what it really meant.

*translated by Mary Davies*

## PRIMITIVES

No more than halfway out the cave
where the black wounds of bison
drip from the walls and the wheel
still rolls slowly towards us from the future,
I'm busy inventing the brake.
You can tell this
from the slump in my forehead, by the way
my hands tangle in their own loose hair.
But when my woman burns
her strange meat in the shadows —
something with feathers pulled down
on the hot savannah, or something with claws
plucked up from the sucking swamp —
I put by my tools and gaze, recalling
that scrink of flint, the sparks'
quick scatter in the dry wood.
And as the flames braid and waver,
I do the apeman dance, once more walking
on these ugly knuckles, hands clenched
against the earth, as if my infant senses
stumbled their first step in the new world.
O woman, when you fry
in that tatter of smoke, I know
there's no stopping, I can feel
my slow head bob and gnaw
like a blaze that feeds on what we breathe,
then licks itself clean, more mother to us
than those far waters aswarm with dirty life:
fire that is always faithful
to itself, always on the move,
bicker and sweet tongue
and the long backbends of love.

## HAVEN'T YOU NOTICED?

You're talkative.
I see our imaginary life
flit by: a Morse code.
Piles of leaves in the corners of country fields.
Tis fall and you're glib.

Something new's knocking at the shutters.
Say no more of the straw-colored summer.
Pitiless birds are in flight,
and my armpits are cold.

Forget all that. Come closer now.
There's no intimacy
to our words.
Have you noticed this,
then that?
The swallows chasing along the ground are gone.
I've only got one face
when you look at me.

## SOME EXCEPTIONS

When someone calls for help
and the people stay put, when
someone's telephoning loudly about
you in the house next door
and you weren't warned
about it before,
when in the warm nights
the vines defy all nightingales,
when they still wear brassieres
under their blouse,
when false teeth
smile back sweetly,
when concrete melts
like Dali's watches,
when those who've come up short
show up with
long tools,
when tenderness
comes from rinse water,
when you're megalomaniac
and keep very still,
when jealousy still casts
suspicion on female house pets,
when a falling razor blade
cuts nothing but air,
when I imagine
everything going on
with WHEN, without BUT.

## THINK I HEARD SOMETHING

Think I heard something. I'm trying
to give it a name.
Some things are worth it.
Shave the rosebeds:
they're too pretty.
Stop your ears.
The Sirens are singing.
"Before we were human
we heard music."
A glass of milk in hand:
describe it. You never
find the right word
for the madness, when you
fold back the wings of
the feminine angels and
squeeze their breasts.
Just do what you will.
People turn their heads
because they don't understand
every death comes differently.
Electronics fails.
You're helpless.
You don't want to live anymore,
and can't.

*translated by Stuart Friebert*

*Marianne Boruch*

## FIRST SNOW

My grandfather is dying again
all day as rain widens
slipping into snow like the adolescent kid
gone haywire overnight
taller then, not terribly handsome
just knocking over chairs.
I pick up that chair for the thirteenth time
trying to find the old man
gone silent on the porch, staring
as if the windows could stare back, as if kids
still sledded their brains out, evergreens
holding aloft their sad fierce secrets about everything.
So I hear him in my head: did I tell you.
Buffalo Bill on the train. That one.
No, I'd say. Tell me.
It's been November now for too many days,
the month that empties itself cold into harbors,
the month stalled there between weeds and the sleep-locked
boats.
But sitting in this chair again
I could take every bland bit of it
into my arms, brother forgetfulness,
sister indifference. This pause between fall
and the inevitable dead weight
bearing down the beauty of a January day.
Say simply: here I am
and there a stranger waits across from me, closing up
a life so quietly the fall of dust could deafen us.
Or so I sit, arms out as if I could catch him
his eyes turning back
until a kid sleds right into them
1883 or so, breathlessness intact.
No, I say, tell me. Tell me.

## STRANGER IN YOUR ROOM

Late that day, old woman
nothing pulsed. The bike got stiff.
Long miles, I ached it
home, up the freezing driveway

paused, past your window where
you read as usual
the hazel glow of lamp
all winter, words
you stubbornly

clung to. But the curly-headed stranger
poised in darkness
on the pale divan, only
I could see him
across from you, his head cupped
those hands, ice blue: *should I*
*Is she that*

I stepped back. How
carelessly you turned the page!
as if roof
could hold the dark dead weight
wind up, snow
shifting so
against the house.

## AFTER SUPPER IN MADISON, WISCONSIN

Where they come from, I do not know
these dead
walking off their old confusions, 1928
or 1942, the war
just beginning over Sunday dinner.
Here gables in high roost
over forsythia, the same drunken bluebells
slow the vibrant grass.

I am walking west, early May, toward the end
of the century. Silence.
The dead hear it, nothing
but birds
louder than cars. Like a small child
the street wanders: brick  wood  airy trees.
Whole families lost
in such houses where memory presses its body
back into doorways and rooms. I've got to know, the dead
hiss, rigid at the windows, correcting,
quarreling. Gradually
porchlights claim each landing anyway
calling *home home.*
Darkness sets adrift the rest.

It's spring & spring & spring — as though
a mystery
to be found at the bottom of a sack.
So what, the dead whisper. So I look
past the blue railings — the girl
in the day-glo sweatshirt
leaning icily against the slate blue door.

I am polite
to these dead, say, it *is* her, the same girl
1928, 1942, the one you hated or loved
or just didn't believe. Cars
creep down the boulevard,
barely hum. And yes — the same boy, sullen,
lingers on the steps.

# POETRY 1984: FOUR REVIEW-ESSAYS

*Mary Oliver,* **American Primitive** (Atlantic—Little Brown, 1983).
*Gerald Stern,* **Paradise Poems** (Vintage, 1984).
*William Matthews,* **A Happy Childhood** (Atlantic—Little Brown, 1984).
*Charles Wright,* **The Other Side Of The River** (Random House, 1984).

Looking for pleasure, I consulted some of the more recent poetry books. I did not find much. I found plenty of sensitivity and rhetoric, plenty of mannered snipping and trimming for public approval, plenty of self-consciousness and social consciousness and righteousness and self-pity. Mostly I found a sense of strain. But here and there I found pleasure too: some in Mary Oliver, some in Gerald Stern, much in William Matthews and Charles Wright.

The pleasure in reading Mary Oliver's *American Primitive* comes in bits and flashes, less often in whole poems. She writes spare poetry that seems to have come hard, after a long hunt for exactly the right phrase; and the hunt may produce an image perhaps too precious, like the moles' finding the earth "delicious," or too often repeated, like "the flowers burn," or a bit too obviously poetic, like "the white flower of dreams" or egrets "like a shower of white fire." But sometimes a phrase bursts through, more right and hard than anyone could have planned. She recognizes these and gives them their way, as when a climbing blacksnake becomes "a long ladder of muscle" or when she comes suddenly on a doe and her new fawn: "I meet them./I can only stare.// She is the most beautiful woman/ I have ever seen."

Oliver's most frequent emotion in this book is physical joy, and when it pervades a poem the whole poem may become a spontaneous pleasure for both her and her reader. "Spring" provides this pleasure:

I lift my face to the pale flowers
of the rain. They're soft as linen,
clean as holy water. Meanwhile
my dog runs off, noses down packed leaves
into damp, mysterious tunnels.
He says the smells are rising now
stiff and lively; he says the beasts
are waking up now full of oil,
sleep sweat, tag-ends of dreams. The rain
rubs its shining hands all over me.
My dog returns and barks fiercely, he says
each secret body is the richest advisor,
deep in the black earth such fuming
nuggets of joy!

The poem starts self-consciously enough, with an almost too "poetic" reference to rain as "pale flowers," but when the dog barks his discoveries, the poem becomes humorous and impudent. What could be fresher or more right than smells that are "stiff and lively," beasts waking up "full of oil" or "sleep sweat"? Or what more outrageously accurate than the final "fuming nuggets," that instead of closing the subject, open all the possibilities that *are* spring.

Gerald Stern's *Paradise Poems* contains many whole poems that give pleasure in a very specific way that he has used in his previous two books. He creates a persona who is clearly himself, yet as distinct from himself as Berryman's Henry Pussycat. Like Henry, Stern's persona laughs at himself, but unlike Berryman, Stern treats his "I" with affection and respect rather than pity. He laughs *with* him as well as *at* him and both enjoy themselves. So does the reader. A typical example of how this rueful smile says something profoundly sentimental while poking fun at sentimentality is "The Nettle Tree":

Mine was the nettle tree, the nettle tree.
It grew beside the garage and on the river
and I protected it from all destroyers.

I loved the hanging branches and the trunk
that grew like a pole. I loved the little crown
that waved like a feather. I sat for hours watching

the birds come in to eat the berries. I read
my Homer there — I wanted to stay forever
sleeping and dreaming. I put my head on the trunk

to hear my sounds. It was my connection for years,
half hanging in the wind — half leaning, half standing.
It was my only link. It was my luxury.

Stern's "I" is in love with an inferior, weedy tree, growing in a careless and unimportant place. He makes it his oracle and goddess, the connection with the cosmos and his protection against it, even though they are both "half hanging in the wind — half leaning, half standing." This stunted creature is his "luxury." As if affecting a playful limp, Stern has succeeded in saying something pretty heavy, which has been said more portentously many times before. But here it comes to us so slyly that we enjoy it enough so that we may even accept it. This is whimsy at its most deft. The danger is that if it recurs too often it smacks of mannerism. Stern sits under so many trees, listening to the birds and "finding my own place/ in the scheme of things," in tune with so much mud, so many grassblades, city streets, painters, composers, more composers, and small red dogs in Mexico, Romania, Iowa, Pennsylvania or ancient Greece that one could *almost* grow weary even of delight. I say *almost*. Don't read the book at one sitting, but sip and return. No one has ever made the edges of a middling suburban life more mysterious or more satisfying.

There are many pleasures in William Matthews' *A Happy Childhood*: range, variety, an ear that knows exactly when enough's enough, no endings that come too soon or too hard, nothing that sticks out as too carefully managed or too carefully dropped. But the greatest pleasure is an intellectual one, the way he reflects on the mundane and the quotidian and extracts from

them their essential paradoxes: the wrong in right, the right in wrong, the "sweet ferocity of excellence." "Who is wrong by himself,// and who is by himself except in error?" "What's wrong is to live by correction, to be good." "Preserve our losses that we may never starve." "The bright rage happiness burns by/ when what you love is yours and yours alone." Excerpted, these observations sound perhaps merely clever, but they grow so unpretentiously out of the poems that generate them that they seem the natural thing to say. Take, for example, one of the eight ten-line sections of "Good," with which the book opens:

> Most of the time nothing happens here, we're fond
> of saying. I love those stories and poems
>
> an editor for *Scrotum* or *Terrorist Quarterly*
> would describe that way, and besides,
> every time in all my life I've said or heard
>
> the phrase it's been a good lie, meaning
> at least that crime and melodrama rates
>
> are low enough that we can see, if we want,
> the huge slow wheel of daily life, love and boredom,
> turning deep in the ship-eating waters.

The first two lines are a bland truism — describing a place as one where (thank goodness) nothing happens; then comes the dawning disquiet that low "crime and melodrama rates" are only surface symptoms that obscure the real thing, "the huge, slow wheel of daily life, love and boredom,/turning deep in the ship-eating waters." In this sense nearly all our perceptions of evil become a "good lie." Out of blandness and a bit of easy humor Matthews has earned the right to make the last stanza into a solemn pronouncement.

Without the humor, of course, he couldn't do it, we would wall ourselves against the frightening realization; but we are put off guard by "the editor from *Scrotum* or *Terrorist Quarterly*," by the crime rate that is also the "melodrama rate," by the addition of

"boredom" to "life and love," and the slight twist that turns *man-eating* and *shark-infested* into "ship-eating" waters and *white lie* into "good lie," meaning not only *protective good* but *good and dead.* The way he smiles and winces and offers no easy outs, yet indulges in no self-pity, offers readers a very real adult pleasure.

The pleasure of reading Charles Wright's *The Other Side of the River* is a leisurely pleasure that builds slowly, an accumulating awareness that seems to grow almost unawares, in total ease. In long lines in long poems that sound almost like unpremeditated, rambling back-porch narratives and reflections, he drifts from present scene to historical anecdote to personal memory and back and forth and back — in wholes that are segments separated only by a thin three-quarter-inch line and a double space. He interjects occasional startling generalizations which seem to come more like the overflow of a rain barrel than a prepared conclusion. The reader receives the same pleasure that he would from watching his own mind drift and halt and drift. He wants to and feels that he could pick up his own pen and continue the poem. "Lonesome Pine Special" illustrates this structure. The whole poem is seven pages long, but the parts are complete in themselves like bits of memory that wander toward their point by lingering over each detail, even the apparently unimportant ones. Here is the third section from the end:

There is so little to say, and so much time to say it in.

Once, in 1955 on an icy road in Sam's Gap, North Carolina,
Going north into Tennessee on US 23,
I spun out on a slick patch
And the car turned once-and-a-half around,
Stopping at last with one front wheel on a rock
and the other on air,
Hundreds of feet of air down the mountainside
I backed away from, mortal again
After having left myself
and returned, having watched myself

Wrench the wheel toward the spin, as I'm doing now,
Stop and shift to reverse, as I'm doing now,
and back out on the road
As I entered my arms and fingers again
Calmly, as though I had never left them,
Shift to low, and never question the grace
That had put me there and alive, as I'm doing now . . .

"There is so little to say," Wright says, then slowly stirs his matter toward the paradox that Matthews would have presented more overtly. The little to say becomes everything to do with being mortal and staying that way: the surprise of the skid, the sudden awareness of impending death, the withdrawal of reason to watch the instinctive physical reflex that preserves life, then the re-entry into arms and fingers again without question. The little to say has become the whole mystery of inhabiting a body, the telling has shrunk to about sonnet size. The question will take a lifetime of "questioning the grace/ that put me there and alive, as I am doing now . . ."

The last lines of the whole poem follow an abandoned road to wherever it may take him: "It dips downhill and I follow it./ It dips down and disappears and I follow it." The pleasure of following down a road that is so minutely detailed and contains so many familiar things that surprise in rediscovery provides both intellectual and sensory enjoyment in a variety as wide as shared experience itself. Now, on the first page of my Wright poem I'll say —

Analyzing my pleasure in these four books has suggested some disquieting questions I must ask myself. Why *doesn't* the poetry that gives me pleasure grind an axe, pity a tormented soul, take a firm stand, stiffen a resolve, or tease a social foible? Why doesn't it howl or crow? Why do I take pleasure chiefly in light that flickers off dark surfaces and penetrates their darkness for several layers only to suggest more unpenetrated layers below? Why do I enjoy most the rhetoric that conceals rhetoric, the voice pitched just loud enough to hear, the simplicity that is not really

simple, the truth that is also its opposite? The reason is not skill; all the books I looked at were skillfully crafted. It isn't the form chosen. Nothing could be more different than Oliver's compactness and Wright's fullness. Perhaps it's a matter of tone. Not one of these poets demanded or scolded or whined or insisted that the world is round. Some readers will find other pleasures in these poems and those same pleasures in other recent books. I have not tried to exhaust the rich harvest of the last two years. But reading these four, they will be quite literally re-freshed.

*Alberta Turner*

**The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams,** *ed. John Thirlwall* (New Directions, 1957; 1984).

This is merely a reprinting, and not a new edition, of the collection that was issued in 1957, but inasmuch as the book has been out of print for some time, we can be grateful to New Directions. Of course, that feeling's tempered by this reservation: where are the other letters, and why wasn't this "opportunity" seized to reconsider, reedit?

While we all love reading other people's letters, there are frequently huge lulls in most correspondences. But you'll stay awake for these letters, and at one point you may even hope to run across one addressed to you — to be sparked by one of those moments Williams always manages to light in every letter, from the earliest, to his mother, his wife (the ones he writes her while returning from Europe by ship, while she stays behind with the boys, are superb "essays" on being a solitary traveller), and son (the one to William Eric, off studying at Williams College, I immediately xeroxed and sent to my son at college), on through his developing relationships with friends and adversaries in the literary world, among them "Rezra" (Pound) (written from a deep center of playful comradeship — they were fortunate to have each other from early on), Marianne Moore (they "danced" around some mighty serious subjects), Harriet Monroe (she never knew what she was getting), Amy Lowell (poor Amy!), Kenneth Burke, Richard Eberhart, James Laughlin (without whom. . . .), Robert Lowell (they both look good in these), Robert McAlmon, John Crowe Ransom, Selden Rodman, Wallace Stevens (they never quite. . . .), "Pep" (Nathanael West), Louis Zukofsky (Williams is so patient here!), John Thirlwall (his — ordinary — editor), Gertrude Stein, Kay Boyle (the long long letter to her among the most important, for the way it sets out to define American poetics), Alfred Stieglitz, Babette Deutsch, Horace Gregory, Srinivas Rayaprol, Sister Bernetta Quinn (sweet-pea bouquets), et al.

As I say, there's not one letter without something like a deep human spot, or stain, that won't come out. Here's an example,

from a touching letter to Norman Holmes Pearson (one of the first college professors, the note tells us, to teach *Paterson*) dated Nov. 7, 1938: "It must be change of life. It must be the weather. I go about forgetting to cork the cleaning fluid bottle. I strike my dwindling thighs against miraculously obstructing chairs. I pick up a book and dance with it vaguely, then lay it down again without having found a place for it. But that is only the surface. Inside I possess the heart of a fly, not even so much heart, for a fly will at least struggle against the spider. I hit the wrong keys. I am not even ashamed to speak of these things." Let's go on a tiny journey now through some of the letters. To start with, here's a sample from one of several to Harriet Monroe, who'd founded *Poetry* and looked to Pound and Williams for help, among others. How quickly Williams manages to see things from all sides —

## 13: To Harriet Monroe

*131 W. Passaic Ave., Rutherford, N.J.*
*March 5, 1913*

My dear Miss Monroe: Your courteous letter startles me — not merely because you return with it two of my poems, truly. I shall take up the suggestions it contains, but I cannot resist the pleasure first of expostulating with you a moment.

I had looked upon *Poetry* as a forum wherein competent poets might speak freely, uncensored by any standard of rules. *Poetry* seemed to me a protest against the attitude of every other periodical American publication in this respect.

I am startled to see that you are fast gravitating to the usual editorial position, and I am startled to feel that perhaps this is inevitable: that as soon as one says, "I am an editor!" he, having been in the march of the poets, faces about upon them.

I mean that perhaps it is a law that between the producer and the exposer of verse there must inevitably exist a contest. The poet comes forward assailing the trite and the established, while the editor is to shear off all roughness and extravagance. It startled me when I realized that this is perhaps inevitable. . . .

Would that more writers and editors engaged in such "courteous" talk.

* * *

Here's Williams writing from his seat on *Others*, which he was helping edit. Practicing what he preached in the broadest and deepest sense, he would continue writing to Turner for years with the same passion for and commitment to "a personal language," and couched in a way to make you want to knock yourself out to respond —

### 31: To Alva N. Turner

*June 25, 1919*

Dear Sir: Don't you know that you cannot possibly interest me — Who am I? — by anything along unexplored lines, except it be along the line of artistic form and NEVER along the line of mere cerebral content. What the hell do I or does any artist care for the moralizings of a EUNUCH or a Fred Douglas, UNLESS the stuff be used as a PRETEXT for the REAL thing which is a new artistic form. THE FORM of your three poems that I accepted was what pleased me. You used certain semitechnical terms such as "crus" and "flavicomous" in a fascinating way. You have invented there a new COLOR. Do you get me?

The three poems I selected were charming. Full of reserve energy. The two you think I will like in this batch are ROTTEN. Now don't get mad! I'm right and you're wrong and you'll probably smile and agree with me. In fact, any man who could do as good work as you did in the first three poems cannot fail to see the truth (which he already must know) when his mind is refreshed by the pointed finger.

*Others* has been in existence 4 years. I am not the editor except for this issue. I'll send you a copy. . . . My dear man, God bless you, you are a wonder! Never have I seen such ROTTEN work which gives such hope — such failure mixed with such an intangible something that is down in the ROCKS at the center of the world.

Keep it up. You have a flavor that is unapproachable. BUT, Jesus Christ, how rottenly you can write. I read and say to myself "This man is hopeless" then a flood of feeling goes over me and I say "This man is a genius." You are a genius. BUT you don't know yet how to write. If you are not too old to learn you can take my word for it (which you don't give a damn for, of course) you have the goods. . . .

Good luck — it's a hell of a life but keep it up. You are far ahead of the game in some respects: I mean you are using a personal language, you are careless of effect and YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY. AND you are full of nuts —. Don't get mad. Forget morals and long stories and write some POEMS.

Yours,
W. C. WILLIAMS

* * *

Williams was a great observer, and he invariably seemed to sense which of his observations his correspondents would most enjoy. Given Marianne Moore's love of animals, neither Williams's observations nor his comparisons in the following should surprise the reader —

## 45: To Marianne Moore

*Vienna, Austria*
*April 14, 1924*

Dear Marianne: I meant to begin "dear Dopple" but forgot. It must be hard to stand and see the beautiful birds of paradise (like me) winging southward each year over your ploughed and reploughed ten acre lot. But then, there are the rabbits who are really never seen till nearly winter. You always see them too.

So did I, in coming into Vienna. We had crossed rather high and very cold mountains during the night. After Venice this was a sad experience, but in the early spring fields, as we came over the great flat expanse south of the capital, I began to notice great jack rabbits

— sometimes two or three together — who would leap off as the train approached. There wasn't a bit of cover as far as the eye could see. I wondered why these cabbage devouring beasts were allowed to go about that way — but apparently it is the custom here.

Then there are the blackbirds; they too stay all winter in the north. The curious thing here is that they are perfect American robins — except that they are black. Their whole build, their walk, and the way they stand looking sidelong in one direction and then leap in the other at the worm is perfect robin. The song too is very robin like. Of course they are both thrushes.

St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice — have you ever seen it? — is my rich ideal of pelt and plumage — and you really should let us publish your book. . . .

Florence is trying to go to sleep under a great feather bolster and the Spaniard in the next room is puffing like a cow or a horse — so good night — *gutter nacht*, as the Spaniard says to the maid, and I hear him through the double door with the clothes press in front of it — *gutter nacht.*

Yours,
"WILLIAM"

* * *

Often preoccupied with technical and theoretical matters, as in the following letter to Pound, Williams nonetheless kept his diction and his anarchic sense of fun more unpredictable than would your average theorist!

### 91: TO EZRA POUND

*June, 1932*

Dear Ezra: I've been playing with a theory that the inexplicitness of modern verse as compared with, let us say, the *Iliad*, and our increasingly difficult music in the verse as compared with the more or less downrightness of their line forms — have been the result of a clearly understandable revolution in poetic attitude. Whereas

formerly the music which accompanied the words amplified, certified and released them, today the words we write, failing a patent music, have become the music itself, and the understanding of the individual (presumed) is now that which used to be the words.

This blasts out of existence forever all the puerilities of the dum te dum versifiers and puts it up to the reader to be a man — if possible. There are not many things to believe, but the trouble is no one believes them. Modern verse forces belief. It is music to that, in every sense, when if ever and in whoever it does or may exist. Without the word (the man himself) the music (verse as we know it today) is only a melody of sounds. But it is magnificent when it plays about some kind of certitude.

Floss has just brought me up an applejack mint julep which I enjoy. — We do produce good applejack in Jersey — and Floss can mix 'em.

Confusion of thought is the worst devilment I have to suffer — as it must be the hell itself of all intelligence. Unbelief is impossible — merely because it is impossible, negation, futility, nothingness. — But the crap that is offered for sale by the big believing corporations — (What the hell! I don't even think of them, it isn't that). It's the lack of focus that drives me to the edge of insanity.

I've tried all sorts of personal adjustments — other than a complete let go —

Returning to the writing of verse, which is the only thing that concerns us after all: certainly there is nothing for it but to go on with a complex quantitative music and to further accuracy of image (notes in a scale) and — the rest (undefined save in individual poems) — a music which can only have authority as we —

I'm a little drunk —

*Contact* can't pay for verse or anything else. I mentioned to Pep West that you had more or less objectionably asked me if I was doing this (editing, publishing) *Contact* in order to offer you a mouthpiece — I told him I had told you to go to hell. He said he'd be mighty glad to have a *Canto*, that he thought them great.

But we can't pay a nickel —
(After another two hours)

The Junior Prom at the High School: Bill is taking his first girl (after an interval of five years). The fishing period and girl-hating has passed again. This one has taught him to dance — he is getting ready to take a bath — now when it is almost time to leave the house.

Yes, I have wanted to kick myself (as you suggest) for not realizing more about Ford Madox's verse. If he were only not so unapproachable, so gone nowadays. I want to but it is not to be done. Also he is too much like my father was — too English for me ever to be able to talk with him animal to animal.

It's the middle of a June evening.

No news — much I'd like to do.

Yours,
BILL

A "little drunk" on applejack mint julep, Williams can pull out his father-telescope and call Pound over for a look at young Bill. The leap to Ford Madox Ford and Williams's own father makes us dizzy. —

* * *

## 94: TO KAY BOYLE

[*1932*]

Dear Kay Boyle: You say: "Some kind of poetic form has to be found or I'll go crazy. I can't go on taking what you (and others) make possible and beautiful. I think I've got lots to say in poetry and no, no, no form. Lousy — loose — *no punch* — no shape — no agony of line like the backside or a lovely thigh or whatnot."

Precisely — and a timely reaction of the first importance; it means the present moment for what it is, a formless interim — but those are periods calling more for invention which mask or should mask a feverish activity still out of sight to the generality of observers. There is no workable poetic form extant among us today.

Joyce and Stein have been paramount in knocking the props from under a new technique in the past ten years and enforcing it. They have specifically gone out

> of their way to draw down the attention on words, so that the line has become pulverous instead of metallic — or at least ductile. Your comment marks clearly for me the definite departure from that sort of thing toward a metrical coherence of some sort — not a *return* to anything, for God's sake let us be clear on that at the beginning. Let us once and for all understand that Eliot is finally and definitely dead — and his troop along with him. . . .

What follows this introductory passage is a long meditation that earns Williams the right to dump on Eliot a little.

* * *

Here's the last section of a letter to Marianne Moore on Dec. 23, 1936:

> If only — I keep saying year in year out — it were possible for "us" to have a place, a location, to which we could resort, singly or otherwise, and to which others could follow us as dogs follow each other — without formality but surely — where we could be known as poets and our work be seen — and we could see the work of others and buy it and have it! Why can't such a thing come about? It seems so brainless and spineless a thing for us to be "exiles" in too literal and accepted a sense. Being exiles might we not at least, as exiles, consort more easily together? We seem needlessly isolated and we suffer dully, supinely. I am not one for leading a crusade, but I'd lead a little group through the underbrush to a place in the woods, or under a barn if I thought anyone would (or perhaps, could) follow me. Or I'd follow. The basis for an agreement is the thing that is perhaps lacking. And perhaps your catholic breadth of character, more than your mind, even, might be that thing — and the thing we admire. But nobody moves — or moves only singly. Is this hope?

" . . . and buy it and have it!"

* * *

## 122: To James Laughlin

*April 26, 1939*

Dear Jim: One of the most difficult and important things, I should say, for a young man to learn would be the limitations of his teachers, at Harvard as elsewhere. It's forbidden ground in most cases, deliberately hidden and desperately defended against attack. The facts of the case aren't desired, besides which the natural modesty of youth makes us susceptible to just the sort of deceit that those in positions of authority practice against us — when we are young — to hide from us just that which we should know.

It takes us most of our lives to find out how limited the world is. Very little is understood other than that which has been underscored by authority. Nobody will take the trouble to really get down to work on new proposals. Perhaps the university as such must inevitably place itself as a barrier to the new just by being a defender of the old and the established. I once heard the elderly and intelligent and tolerant Dean Gauss of Princeton (much to my surprise) discourse on that subject. He was overruled later by several of his hirelings.

Aristocrats with their blanket lack of esteem for any one who is not an aristocrat are often, I suppose, in an advantageous position toward the beginnings of their lives because of that. It is hard otherwise to grasp that we know, that we are able, that others are barriers to our progress right from the beginning. I for one have hung back just from a lack of conviction of the dullness of others. I have said, Why should I presume? when I should have said, For God's sake, get the hell out of my way and at once! So much time is lost.

Damn the bastards for saying that you can't mix auditory and visual standards in poetry. Who the hell ever invented these two categories but themselves? Those are the questions that set up all academic controversies. The trouble with them is that they aren't real questions at all; they are merely evidence of lack of definition in the terms. Define your terms and the question disappears. Philosophy is full of them until someone who knows what he is about shows them up.

What they, the formulators of that particular ques-

tion, do not know, is that an auditory quality, a NEW auditory quality, underlies and determines the visual quality which they object to. Let it pass, Jim, it's one of the limitations of the present grade of teachers. Do your stuff, listen hard and make discoveries. If we're right, we'll turn out to be termites in their wooden legs. If we're wrong, the birds will eat us.

Yours,
BILL

Though things might be changing in the universities, and students don't much act out of a center of natural modesty, those of us in positions of authority may be in the way and our legs made of plastic.

* * *

## 201: TO ROBERT LOWELL

*March 11, 1952*

Dear Cal: A very discerning and friendly letter. Thank you for it, it has changed my attitude toward Eliot more than anything I have ever read of him. I accept him now for what he is, I have never been willing before to do that. He is a "strong man" of letters, unrelated to the scene. Surely he knocked us higher than a kite in the early days. But we shouldn't have resented him; no doubt, if he could, he would have joined us, at least in what we intended. But we were so weakly based, so uncertain of everything, that a mere breeze could capsize us — and did. The longer wave takes him in its rise, but we couldn't have known that while the battle was on.

I'm glad you recognized my affection for Pound and saw what I intended to make known of him. He too was an orchid in my forest, he had no interest, really, for my trees, no more than did Eliot. They both belonged to an alien world, a world perhaps more elevated than mine, more removed from my rigors. I have always felt as if I were sweating it out somewhere low, among the reptiles, hidden in the underbrush, hearing the monkeys

overhead. Their defeats were my defeats, I belonged to them more than to a more mobile world. . . .

* * *

When you put this collection on the shelf you'll have to make room, as I did, between Mariani's biography and the poems. And run the risk of opening to the life and work again; come on in, they'll restore you.

*Stuart Friebert*

*John Ashbery*, **A Wave** (Viking, 1984).

The poetry of John Ashbery has probably evoked more literary analysis than that of any other living American poet, much of it highly intelligent, lucid, and persuasive. But the Ashbery who often emerges from the criticism is for me a rather different figure from the one I encounter in the poems. The critics' Ashbery (and here I should exempt those such as Marjorie Perloff and Douglas Crase, who approach him from other perspectives) is frequently a modern Romantic, all tropes and *topoi*, engaged in a kind of expressive discourse whose meanings can be teased out and elucidated, given enough patience and enterprise. The typical strategy is to fit the poet into a thematic framework, scissoring out bits of poems that seem to address such themes as process:

> But there is something else — call it a consistent
>  eventfulness,
> A common appreciation of the way things have of unfolding
> When your attention is distracted for a moment, and then
> It's all bumps and history, as though this crusted surface
> Had always been around, didn't just happen to come into
>  being
> A short time ago,
>
> ("A Wave")

or mutability:

> Another blueprint: some foxing, woolly the foliage
> On this dusky shrine
> Under the glass dome on the spinet
> To make it seem all these voices were once one,
>
> ("Edition Peters, Leipzig")

and cross-referencing these fragments to passages in Emerson or Stevens (who for these critics is also a Romantic poet). Such

procedures are, as I've said, persuasive: every time I read an essay in the *New York Review of Books* I'm convinced that I have the key to reading Ashbery at last.

Yet when I return to the poems, the euphoria of "understanding" diminishes. The problem with reading Ashbery thematically, it seems to me, is that too much leaks out around the edges: the poems' quirkiness, their extraordinary range of allusion and mannerism and tone, their deeply disconcerting habit of shifting subject midstream and often midsentence — these essential aspects of the poet's work are surely more central to any reader's experience than critical accounts usually suggest. Not that thematic readings are altogether inappropriate. Indeed, given our rage for order, they're probably unavoidable: I am myself inclined to see *A Wave* as centered on the twinned themes of love and death, and the links between them, and I too can trot out passages in support:

> And as the luckless describe love in glowing terms to
> strangers
> In taverns, and the seemingly blessed may be unaware of
> having lost it,
> So always there is a small remnant
> Whose lives are congruent with their souls
> And who ever afterward know no mystery in it,
> The cimmerian moment in which all lives, all destinies
> And incompleted destinies were swamped
> As though by a giant wave that picks itself up
> Out of a calm sea and retreats again into nowhere
> Once its damage is done.
>
> ("A Wave")

But the relation between language and idea, the process by which we get from the particular to the general, is mysterious, contradictory, and risky.

I have been carrying *A Wave* around for about a month now, and for awhile my experience of it was exhilarating and infuriat-

ing in about equal measure. I found myself dipping into it, fascinated, dazzled, yet easily distracted: its texture is simply too dense to encourage sustained attention for more than about a poem or two at a time. Its scope and enormous inclusiveness are easily intimidating, and the sinuous, looping line of its voice can sometimes descend to what seems like endless garrulity. The low point of the volume for me is the long, tediously campy "Description of a Masque" in prose, but its self-indulgence and archness are reflected elsewhere in the book as well. What has kept me coming back to these poems is, simply put, the overwhelming experience of beauty they frequently provide. This is partly a matter of rhetoric — Ashbery is, as everybody knows, an absolute master of nuance, cadence, and tonal complexity — but it is also something more human and more profound. In case the suspicion persists that Ashbery is simply a wry technician or a fast-talking satirist of popular culture, *A Wave* gives ample evidence of his serious and generous vision.

Even more than in his earlier work, Ashbery is working here on the narrow edge where the private becomes the public. As usual, there are suggestive references to other writers — I'm particularly aware here of the presence of Keats, the early Auden, and the Eliot of *Four Quartets* — but it seems to me a mistake to try to read Ashbery in the same terms. It's useful to remember his fondness for the more open structures of writers like Raymond Roussel and Gertrude Stein, although it would seem equally wrong to take these poems as automatic writing. Ashbery writes with a record on the turntable, and it shows: the poems often seem to record the drift of consciousness, the simultaneous play of a number of random subjects. But although they seem to risk hermeticism, even solipsism, at their best (which is most of the time) the private experience is turned inside out, so that with a shock of wonder I seem to find myself inside the poem's world rather than outside it. Ashbery has himself described this sensation with reference to Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*:

> *Stanzas in Meditation* gives one the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a "plot," though it would be dif-

> ficult to say precisely what is going on. Sometimes the story has the logic of a dream. . . . But it is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their "way of happening," and the story of *Stanzas in Meditation* is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars. The poem is a hymn to possibility.[1]

Read with anxiety about logic and "plot," Ashbery's poems are certain to feel frustrating and inaccessible. Read as models of experience, as hymns to possibility, they unfold in deeply satisfying — if still mysterious — ways.

A good example is "Problems":

> Rough stares, sometimes a hello,
> A something to carry. Yes and over it
> The feeling of one to one like leaves blowing
> Between this imaginary, real world and the sky
> Which is sometimes a terrible color
> But is surely always and only as we imagine it?
> I forgot to say there are extra things.
> Once, someone — my father — came to me and spoke
> Extreme words amid the caution of the time.
> I was too drunk, too scared to know what was being said
> Around us then, only that it was a final
> Shelving off, that it was now and never,
> The way things would come to pass.
> You can subscribe to this.
> It always lets you know how well
> You're doing, how well along the thing is with its growing.
> Was it a pattern of wheat
> On the spotted walls you wanted to show me
> Or are these the things always coming,
> The churning, moving support that lets us rock still?

1. John Ashbery, "The Impossible," *Poetry* 90, no. 4 (July 1957): 241. I am indebted to Marjorie Perloff for this citation.

It would be relatively easy to generalize about this poem, to suggest that the "problems" it addresses are ones of communication and relationship, to guess that the "I" is Ashbery and that the poem's origins lie in a disturbing confrontation with his father. But to search thus for a key to unlock the poem would be I think to miss the point: "Problems" is not confessional, and it is more useful (and interesting) to experience what it does than to ask what it means.

What I like best about this poem is its reverberation between the general (the metaphors through which it describes "the feeling of one to one," the fear of solipsistic isolation) and the glimpses of particular situations and relationships, and also the rhetoric through which any simple assumptions about those relations are offset. The first six lines suggest a (deliberate?) echo of Stevens' "The Snow Man," but Stevens would never have written the next seven lines, and it is the way Ashbery modulates from one section to the next through the wonderfully offhand, poker-faced "I forgot to say there are extra things" that provides his characteristic note. The whole poem is charged with paradox (the world is "imaginary" and "real" at the same time), its language displaced from its familiar contexts ("now and never" rather than "now or never") just enough to keep us open and alert. The final section is even stranger: "You can subscribe to this" seems to reflect in a tone of high seriousness the possibility of belief (although, typically, the referent of "this," the nature of the principle, has not been specified), but the next line — "It always lets you know how well / You're doing" — makes the "subscription" sound suspiciously like that to a self-help magazine. And "how well along the thing is with its growing" appropriates the American idiom in a way that is somehow goofy and transcendent at once. The last four lines are both intimate and visionary, reflecting the desire to see order in random flux, to find stability in "the things always coming," to trust the firmness in fluidity "that lets us rock still." I am of course narrowing the range of the poem's possibilities here; other readers will bring their own "set of particulars" to it and emerge in different places, but I think they will find it equally exhilarating.

Other poems in *A Wave* are almost purely immune to paraphrase, and I should quote one to represent the volume fairly. The following poem gives me the uncanny sense that everything is specified except its subject: it presents a sort of vivid matrix of meaning, a complex and poignant portrait of grief and decay, brief flashes of a narrative of courtship and acceptance — and yet, as Ashbery said about Stein, it is not the events themselves but their "way of happening" that is at the center.

TREFOIL

Imagine some tinkling curiosity from the years back —
The fashions aren't old enough yet to look out of fashion.
It is a picture of patient windows, with trees
Of two minds half-caught in their buzz and luster,
The froth of everyone's ideas as personal and skimpy as ever.

The windows taught us one thing: a great, square grief
Not alleviated or distracted by anything, since the pattern
Must establish itself before it can grow old, cannot weather
    nicely
Keeping a notion of squirrels and peacocks to punctuate
Chapters of fine print as they are ground down, growing
    ever finer
To assume the strict title of dust someday. No, there is no
    room now
For oceans, blizzards: only night, with fingers of steel
Pressing the lost lid, searching forever unquietly the
    mechanism
To unclasp all this into warbled sunlight, the day
The gaunt parson comes to ask for your hand. Nothing is
    flying,
Sinking; it is as though the resistance of all things
To the earth were so much casual embroidery, years
In the making, barely glimpsed at the appointed time.

Through it all a stiffness persists
Of someone who had changed her mind, moved by your
arguments
And waiting till the last possible moment to confess it,
To let you know you were wanted, even a lot, more than you
could
Imagine. But all that is, as they say, another story.

Rather than commenting in detail on this wonderful poem, I will confine myself to using it to point out two additional strengths in Ashbery's work. One is his remarkable ear: the subtle music of the first stanza, for instance, is important in establishing its dreamy, evocative tone. The other is the way Ashbery uses shifts in diction to widen his frame of reference: most of the poem seems confined to a historical or literary past, a world of music box and trefoil windows, but the surprising diction of "even a lot" in the last stanza suddenly jars us into the present, throwing the scene into a different, more immediate perspective. Similar effects are present throughout the volume: one of its chief delights is a curious doubleness through which poems firmly grounded in the contemporary landscape ("Ditto, Kiddo," "Proust's Questionnaire," "Darlene's Hospital") become mythic and timeless as well.

As final authority for the attitude toward reading Ashbery I have been urging here, I can cite the poet himself. The book's long title poem is witty, moving, deeply evocative, and enormously difficult. Surely it is also the most extended statement on his own work Ashbery has yet given us: many of its passages may be read as defining and commenting on the sorts of strategy I have been discussing here. On the danger of trying to fit the poems too neatly into a thematic pattern:

But behind what looks like heaps of slag the peril
Consists in explaining everything too evenly. Those

Suffering from the blahs are unlikely to notice that the
topic
Of today's lecture doesn't exist yet, and in their trauma
Will become one with the vast praying audience as it sways
and bends
To the rhythm of an almost inaudible piccolo.

And on the contrast between the stultifying urge to impose generalized "meaning" or "sense" on experience, and the liberating pleasure of simply yielding to the experience (whether of art or life) itself:

. . . It's fun to scratch around
And maybe come up with something. But for the tender blur
Of the setting to mean something, words must be ejected
bodily,
A certain crispness be avoided in favor of a density
Of strutted opinion doomed to wilt in oblivion. . . .
. . . And the issue
Of making sense becomes such a far-off one. Isn't this
"sense" —
This little of my life that I can see — that answers me
Like a dog, and wags its tail, though excitement and fidelity
are
About all that ever gets expressed? What did I ever do
To want to wander over into something else, an explanation
Of how I behaved, for instance, when knowing can have this
Sublime rind of excitement, like the shore of a lake in the
desert
Blazing with the sunset? So that if it pleases all my
constructions
To collapse, I shall at least have had that satisfaction, and
known
That it need not be permanent in order to stay alive,
Beaming, confounding with the spell of its good manners.

*A Wave* offers that "sublime rind of excitement" in abundance, richly casting "the spell of its good manners" on readers who will take the time to meet its challenges. Despite its difficulties and occasional longueurs, it is one of the most stimulating and important books I've read in a long time.

*David Walker*

*Sandra McPherson,* **Patron Happiness** (Ecco, 1984).

Reading Sandra McPherson's new book, finding I can keep going back to its poems and discovering new meanings in them, I realize that what has always delighted and intrigued me about this poet's work is the complexity of mind it reveals. McPherson has a naturalist's eye for detail, a philologist's care for language, a psychologist's interest in the workings of mind and emotion, and a scientist's curiosity about process, the way things work. More than most contemporary poets I can think of, she reminds us that poetry is a way of knowing, of assembling facts and truths in comprehensible forms that help us face and understand the world. Not that she parades her learning; it is rather that she invites us to join her in a pursuit of vital connections and telling likenesses — for aesthetic reasons, of course, but for educational ones too, to add to our store of useful knowledge.

In citing her complexity of mind I refer especially to the intricacy of design that McPherson's poems reveal. They seem the product of an imagination that is patient about the time required to bring complicated objects and situations into authentic configurations. And the poet's patience must be matched, at least in part, by the reader's. The poems tend to be dense and intricate, which would account for the fact that McPherson does not yet have the reputation or the readership she deserves; her work is not easy, but the rewards are fully commensurate with the difficulties.

What ought to help lead readers forward is this poet's sense of daring. The subjects she takes on are dramatic and difficult. They pose large questions about human pain and isolation, about the mystery of our existence and our perception of it. The satisfactions McPherson's poems offer come from the recalcitrant materials she is able to unify; she brings together strange facts and difficult emotions, binding them into intricate wholes that are attractive and consolatory as well as informative. Again, the emphasis seems to be that knowledge is creative rather than

destructive, and that poets can be healers, both of themselves and others.

Let me illustrate the complexity and daring by discussing the poem called "The Wheel." It is about a merry-go-round, which we meet first in winter, in a dismantled state:

THE WHEEL

The platform vanishes. The wheel's miraculously
Balanced on snow. Its chairs lie packed
With the merry-go-round's beasts
For Charlie to take far south.

No footprints between the wheel and the ticket booth
But his, fresh. He inspects the spines,
Wires, gears. Frames in uncountable triangles
Still will make you dizzy.

Then suddenly the ragtime's playing
Over the yellow pig on the carousel. It's summer
Too for the saddled chicken,
Who has a rider. But no one chooses,

This time, the black horse. The bandannaed lady
Slides tickets through the windowspace
To her old man. His ribbed hands
Have spun generations. Children who rode,

Grown up now, now believe
The hitching post goes through the heart.
Again Charlie watches that pregnant girl:
Wait until fall, he thinks, leaves will pause

On her stomach before they slip.
Next year she'll be thin and bring her child

To me, this girl who moves like one of my
Animals, smoothly forward, burdened up and down.

Like the snow that will stay till it recedes
To a single spot on his old head, Charlie's rides
Stay open until the miniature train's last turn
Carries hickory leaves and only two of us:

A sad child whose cat, she says, has died;
And in the tailcar myself. Knowing many
Angels too, I'll ride to keep my feet
As silent off the ground as theirs.

*for Robert Huff*

One way to get at this poem's distinctiveness and originality is to compare it briefly to Rilke's famous merry-go-round poem, "Das Karussell" (a translation of this poem appeared in FIELD #25, p. 66). Rilke too makes the turning carousel, with its fabulous animals and rapt children, into a symbol for time and the brevity of human life. But his Symbolist or Post-Symbolist (depending on your terminological preferences) treatment of the subject contrasts sharply with McPherson's Modernist/Post-Modernist approach. Rilke's speaker, austere and melancholy, stands at a fixed distance from the carousel and meditates upon its meaning. He is part of the scene only by being apart from it, detached by his growing awareness of meanings the participants (who include girls just reaching puberty) can never glimpse. One cannot imagine him riding the merry-go-round, or taking his daughter to ride on it and reporting that in a poem. His isolation is essential, and it defines him as a poet, a sort of anonymous priest, wandering through Paris.

It is especially interesting, in that light, to see the playfulness with which McPherson handles a comparable subject and set of perceptions. Her use of space is more elastic, her sense of time shifts more frequently and the relation of her speaker to the merry-go-round is less predictable and more complex. When we

first "see" the merry-go-round, it is present through its absence (as its caretaker is evident only by his tracks in the snow), and the hint of a speaker with special understandings, like Rilke's, is handled obliquely: "Frames in uncountable triangles / Still will make you dizzy." The imagination, potent response to winter and absence, can recreate the vertigo anytime it likes.

The season now changes abruptly, making us aware of the speaker-designer's conscious management of the poem, something comparable to what the refrain accomplishes in Rilke, although less measured and formal. The animals Rilke names are horses, elephants, lions and deer, while McPherson hits us first with the more comical yellow pig and saddled chicken before switching to the modestly sinister and riderless black horse. The sense of play manifested in her scene-shifting and her delight in unlikely detail is very pleasing.

McPherson's poem next opens up, as does Rilke's in its second half, to the march of human generations. She adopts the perspective of children who rode and now, grown up, have a more Rilkean view of the meaning of childhood and loss — "The hitching post goes through the heart" — and then moves into the point of view of Charlie, the ancient operator whose perspective is the longest. And Charlie sees, not the touching pubescent girls of Rilke, but the young pregnant woman who may or may not be conscious, as he is, that she resembles the animals, moving in time "smoothly forward, burdened up and down." How precise and reverberative are the meanings released by each of the words in that phrase! And how carefully balanced are the twin reactions of pathos and amusement!

The last two stanzas introduce a matching symbol, the miniature train (a model of something linear but subject too to cycles and circles, like seasons and generations and wheels). The speaker puts herself on that train, as the passenger in the last car, no more detached from the poem's temporal inevitabilities and depradations than any human observer, Rilke included, could expect to be. It's a wry and comical moment. Rilke's isolation has become something more like detachment, riding alone or, at best, in company with a sad child and the ghost of her cat, plus some

emblematic but genuine hickory leaves. That a present/absent dead cat should be the final animal in the poem is both a fine connection to the appearing and disappearing beasts of the merry-go-round and a sort of odd joke on the poem, teasing it about its own temptations to melancholy.

I have found the poem's last sentence hardest to accept. The angel reference may or may not intend to invoke Rilke, but it needs to be understood as a mixture of the pathetic and the sublime: we should feel both that this speaker may indeed know angels, knowing so much from her observation of the meanings around the merry-go-round, but also that a slightly silly rationalization for the train-ride is being put forward. I resisted this closure through several readings, and if it now succeeds for me the success lies in that tonal mixture plus the curious evocation, one more time, of the smooth and mechanical action of the rising and falling animals. They do seem ethereal to a child in their floating, their not having to touch the ground, their silent defiance of gravity.

This account of "The Wheel" does not exhaust its attractions — I might have explored, for example, the way syntax helps images develop and transform, as in the next-to-last stanza — but it will perhaps suffice to demonstrate the skill and patience with which McPherson assembles the worlds and meanings of her poems. Whether or not she had Rilke's poem in mind makes little difference. What does count is that she does not content herself with his model, but pushes herself to a more flexible, probing approach to the central symbol, mixing tones and perspectives with great care, and by her success convinces her reader that her artistic authority is to be trusted.

"Black Soap," a poem in four parts, presents a different kind of design. Instead of a central object or symbol, it clusters a group of unlikely equivalents: a witch's heart, a pumice stone, a bar of soap made from ashes, and an heirloom ring. To write it, the ever-inquisitive poet needed personal memories, Colette's autobiographical fiction, knowledge of how lye is made, interest in witch-burnings, and, again, that sense of daring I cited. I still

don't fully understand this poem, though I think I am making progress with it. It begins by posing a kind of mystery: why does the speaker associate a bar of soap (black, lathering white) with her grandmother's death?

1
White lather on black soap —
Maria's gift. It reminds me
Of when a woman died
And they handed me her ring.

Then they left to divide the roots for her.
Daylight went down there shining.
By accident, cleaning the hearth
Of a house to leave it for good,
I learned how to see
A star come out: work
My hand into the ashes.

The second stanza begins to suggest an answer to the riddle of the association. White lather and the power of cleansing come from the black soap. A death produces a gift. Daylight illuminates a grave. Scrubbing a hearth brings out a star. We are in the realm of paradox, where creation and destruction, good and evil, loss and renewal, interlock, revealing each other as parts of the same whole. The final image is, I suspect, more than merely metaphorical, since McPherson seldom forgoes a factual base, but I'm not sure what the star is and how it comes out. Perhaps the ashes polish the diamond in the ring or the metal of the rings, or both. In any case, even in my uncertainty, I can sense the connection between the soap and the lather, the death and the ring, the grave and the daylight, and the ashes and their star. It is a breathtaking beginning.

The second section plunges us into Colette's world (*Earthly Paradise*) and the way housewives made their own soap from carefully saved ashes:

2
"You've thrown a chestnut hull into the fireplace again,"
Said Colette's mother. "My clean ashes!"
Naughty Colette had soiled the washing ashes
Of applewood, poplar, and elm.
Stretched over the big cauldron
In the washhouse, hemp cloth held the ashes
The washwoman poured a jug of boiling water on.
They smelled almost sweet as the lye
Filtered into the mass of linen.
The air darkened with blue clouds.
In the smoking lava layer of ashes,
A few cinders of chestnut hulls,
The tannin's yellow stain.

This clear, straight look into an earlier world delights us by its music, its clarity, and its precision. The interest in process I have cited as distinctive to this poet is much in evidence here, held to the perspective of the child, along with the love of reading and the reverence for everyday facts and small details. The anecdote poses no problems of interpretation for the reader — note that the figurative touches, "clouds," "lava," are light and infrequent — who must share eventually in the responsibility of fitting it to the other elements of the poem.

The third section, matching the first, is more mysterious. Instead of the clear delineation of the second or the reverie of the first, it picks up in the middle of a relationship we can only make inferences about:

3
Look for something
You've been every day of your life.
You said it was "lonely."
I'm certain it is also "clean."
My body's big years diminish soap.
My grandmother, whose diamond it was,
Had a stone in her tub.
I rubbed it on my feet

As later I walked,
Building little hoofs,
All summer shoeless on creek gravel.

That black bar of stone
In the widow's clean house,
That volcanic pumice skips
Over most hard places
But softens at least one.

We must conjecture about the "you" and the relation to the "I," but we sense that the opening lines are a means of introducing the pumice stone and the child's fascination with it, matching Colette's with the soapmaking. Reduction emerges now as a motif of the poem. The reductions of ashes to lye, of the grandmother to her corpse and of the grandmother-grandchild relationship to the heirloom ring, are matched by the body's reductions of bars of soap over its years. Process again. And the pumice stone will reduce the built-up calluses on the child's feet. Will it also soften the widow's heart, threatening to harden from journeys on the gravel of grief? The poem is deliberately unspecific, with its "one" and its "at least."

In the fourth and final section we move again into history, into details, we soon discover, of what happened when witches were burned:

4
Once there was a downpour of rain
They took as a judgment.
It confused her billowing, steaming skirts.
Another time — those times were hard —
The executioner let go the twisted hemp
From her neck sooner than he should
Because the flames reached his hands.
Nor would I, if I'd had to live then,
Put my hands into the fire
Those three hours it took to reduce her.
But after, I'd scrub all over

With the ashes of the still warm
Black heart of the witch.

Now the poem achieves its completed design and gives us its magical payoff. The nostalgia of section 2 is reversed by the sentiment summarized in "if I'd had to live then." The woman as witch and victim collapses the grandmother, the speaker, the widow and the mother and daughter and washerwoman of the Colette anecdote into a single figure, pitiable but so potent and mysterious that society feels it must burn her. For a daring moment the poet/speaker identifies with the executioner, excusing his ineptitude on human grounds. The witch's reduction to ashes is somehow a replication of the volcanic processes that produced the pumice stone and the good housekeeping that recycles ashes in the form of soap. How many poets would think to link such processes, and in such fashion?

The speaker's imagined scrubbing in the ashes of the witch's "Black heart" forms a closure that circles the poem back round on itself, to the initial gift of the soap and the even earlier gift of the ring. The poem's ring of association is the heirloom on a larger scale. The experience of all women becomes the speaker's heritage, both their knowledge and joy, their loss and suffering. One could call this a feminist poem in the best and broadest sense of the word. The cool, considered tone of this poem, its musing exploration of curious associations, seems to me among its finest effects. The speaker's presence (we take her to be McPherson) is crucial — the ring of associations is personal, after all — but so is the detachment with which she allows herself to see her own life against the lives of many others, close and far away. Even executioners.

The images of dark and light, black and white, in "Black Soap" are part of a pattern that runs through the book. *Patron Happiness* is strongly and carefully organized, so that the intense constellations and interactions of individual poems soon begin, for the thoughtful reader, to reveal a larger design, with recurring preoccupations, forms and motifs. The collection opens with

a declaration — "Few master a form to be conspicuous in the night" ("The Firefly") — and closes with a question — "What do you think, Patron Happiness?" ("Urban Ode"). In the latter poem the speaker has been noting instances of city mishaps and wounding loneliness. She has also recalled a child running around a cedar bush (cf. the merry-go-round), excited by seeing a jay (birds form another motif in the collection). The girl's happiness turns the poem into an ode, a celebratory gesture, but the final question still surprises everyone: the speaker, the patron she suddenly adopts and identifies, and the reader, who, having found the source of the book's title at the last possible moment, must now reassess the whole collection in light of the sponsorship not of loneliness (a leading theme and concern) but of happiness.

I can't demonstrate all that unity here, just point it out and urge readers to pursue it. Along the way they will learn things about Sandra McPherson — her daughter, the fact that she was adopted and has now met her birthparents and learned her original name, some details of her marriage and her friendships — but the information is incidental to what they will be learning about the world and about themselves and their own relationships. This poet isn't afraid to write about herself, but personal details and private emotions are always a means, never an end. The child in "Urban Ode" who runs out of loneliness and provokes the question that ends the book is recognized as "Never objective, never / Maunderingly subjective." That's why if we say McPherson belongs to a tradition of poets who are remarkable for powers of objectification — Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and, in a curious kinking of the tradition, Sylvia Plath — we must immediately add not only that she is her own independent self vis-a-vis that tradition, but that the objectivity is really a subjectivity tempered by great good sense, humility, and blazing intelligence. She makes us reassess her predecessors and discover similar confoundings of the subject/object distinction.

The simplest poem in the book will demonstrate how the interaction of subjectivity and objectivity operates for this poet:

## EARTHSTARS, BIRTHPARENTS' HOUSE

Geasters. She bent down
At the dappled base of the tree,
And among the brown leaves
Geasters stood up.

Oranges peel like these,
She said. Rinds bent back.
When it rains, their legs swell up
And walk.

Stranger feet
Than mine
All these years
Outside your door.

The final stanza is charged with the emotion of a woman meeting her mother for the first time in middle age. It is powerful not only for its understatement, but for its objectified setting. Mother and daughter aren't discussing their lives and feelings, but looking together at an unusual fungus. We sense that this is no dodge. The poet's "subjective" interest is as firmly fixed on the wonder of a name ("Geaster," which translates as "earthstar") and on the curious shape, texture and behavior of a mushroom most people would pass without noticing. There is no difference here between fact and emotion, spirit and matter. The world is being knit together again before our eyes. And the reader who would understand the poem fully must be willing to take the trouble to know what a geaster is — to look it up in a book or, better still, find one in the field. This poet will not encourage us to be lazy, unobservant, ignorant or "maunderingly subjective." Not, at least, in the presence of her rigorous and beautiful poems if we wish to understand and participate in them.

Let me close by mentioning, as reviewers seldom do, that I like the look and feel of this volume. It mostly lives up to the

merits of its contents. The cover is intriguing, and reveals its relevance gradually. It, and the rest of the design, are by Loretta Li. Even the jacket comments are satisfying. McPherson hasn't always been so fortunate. I remember a blurb on an earlier collection that said, "She has flung down and danced upon most of her competition." As if poetry were violently competitive, even vindictive, and that such qualities are especially attractive in women poets! I know it was "just a metaphor," but metaphors used by and about poets are important, and that one was misleading: not about McPherson's excellence, but about her temperament, her relation to other poets, and about artistic accomplishment in general. In any case, *Patron Happiness* comes to us with two perceptive jacket statements, a fairly lengthy one by J. D. McClatchy and a briefer one by Jorie Graham. Both point to the central and distinctive excellence of the book, and I hope they will help attract new readers to the work of this superb learner and knower, still growing in her art toward a magnitude and originality few poets achieve.

*David Young*

# CONTRIBUTORS

CHANA BLOCH's **Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible** will appear this spring from the University of California Press. She is currently editing and translating **The Selected Poems of Yehuda Amichai** in collaboration with Stephen Mitchell. Her most recent collection of poems, **The Secrets of the Tribe**, appeared in 1981 from Sheep Meadow Press.

MARIANNE BORUCH is teaching this year at the University of Maine, at Farmington. An essay on William Carlos Williams is forthcoming in **The American Poetry Review**.

GÜNTER EICH's prose poems are familiar to regular readers of FIELD. The best place to find more of them is in the FIELD Translation Series volume, **Valuable Nail: Selected Poems of Günter Eich**. The translator of the two in this issue, MARY DAVIES, is an Oberlin senior.

ELTON GLASER teaches at the University of Akron. Wesleyan University Press published his book of poems, **Relics**, last fall.

GARRETT HONGO is the author of **Yellow Light** (Wesleyan, 1982), which has just been reprinted. He teaches at the University of Missouri.

MIROSLAV HOLUB is spending the spring semester in this country as Writer in Residence at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. He is working on a collection of essays and a new book of poems. His earlier collections, **Sagittal Section** and **Interferon, or On Theater**, are both available in the FIELD Translation Series. Holub will receive an honorary degree from Oberlin in May.

LAURA JENSEN, a frequent contributor to FIELD, is the author of **Bad Boats** and **Memory**. Her next collection, **Shelter**, will be published by Dragon Gate in the fall, and a chapbook, **A Sky Empty of Orion**, will appear from Meadow Press this spring.

SHIRLEY KAUFMAN has recently returned to Jerusalem after a reading tour in this country that included Oberlin. Her latest collection is **Claims** (Sheep Meadow Press, 1984).

KARL KROLOW is Germany's most distinguished living poet. His **Selected Poems: On Account Of**, will appear this summer as the tenth volume in the FIELD Translation Series.

The translator is STUART FRIEBERT.

SANDRA McPHERSON's most recent publications are **Patron Happiness** (reviewed in this issue), and two chapbooks, **Responsibility for Blue** (Trilobite Press in Denton, Texas), and **Pheasant Flower** (Owl Creek Press, Missoula, Montana). She writes that she has just accepted a position at the University of California at Davis, and will be moving there this summer.

CHARLES SIMIC writes that his **Selected Poems** will be out in August from Braziller. His comment: "25 years of abusing the patience of kindhearted men and women." Ours: a major milestone in contemporary American poetry.


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